

Light by maplestreet83

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Summary:

Mike is ready to say those three little words to El, but hasn't found the courage yet. But there's no hurry, they have all the time in the world - right?

Light

Author's Note:

The title was inspired by 'Light' from Sleeping at Last.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bk69DmpCYrw>

“Michael! Chief Hopper is here!” Mrs Wheelers loud voice called through the closed door to the basement. All of the six kids gathered around the game table groaned in frustration. It was El’s turn, she was just about to roll the dice to see if she could cast Ray of Frost against the Fire Giant that the party was battling.

“Five more minutes, mom!” Mike yelled out from his seat next to El, before turning back to her, setting his hand on her shoulder reassuringly, his voice getting lower and softer when he said:

“Just roll, we’ll cut off after that and continue next time.” El looked over at him and nodded before grabbing the dice in her hands and started to shake them, everyone’s eyes focusing on her clasped hands, holding their breaths. They had been battling this giant for an hour now, Will had found its location with his True Sight, Lucas and Max had set up a trap for it in a cave, Dustin had lured him into the cave and now it was El’s turn to cast a spell to destroy the entrapped Giant. Biting her lip nervously she let the dice fly onto the table and everyone’s eyes followed them, Will biting his fingernails and Max clenching her fists. The dice fell on the table, rolling a bit before finally stopping still.

“Sixteen!” Lucas yelled, shooting his arms up in the air, Dustin beside him letting out a loud whooping sound and Will letting out a sigh of relief. El grinned from ear to ear, turning over to Mike, happily squeezing his hand under the table. Mike smiled back at her, he felt his heart getting warmer every time she laughed and smiled and he couldn’t help but stare at her face and the small crinkles at the corners of her laughing eyes and her wide smile.

“Sooo?” Dustin asked expectantly, leaning over the game table, his eyebrows raised. Mike quickly turned away from El to look at the

others, realizing he was supposed to narrate what happened next in the campaign.

“Um,” he started, fumbling over his notes, his cheeks heating up. This wasn’t the first time El had caused him to get distracted from his DM duties.

“Michael!” his mom yelled louder, yanking the door to the basement open and standing at the top of the stairs, her hands defiantly on her hips.

“Okay, okay!” he answered her yell, dropping his notes on the table and rolling his eyes. El got up and grabbed her purple backpack from where it lay on the sofa.

“You are just leaving it there?” Will asked, his voice disappointed as Mike also got up and headed over to the stairs. The tall boy ran a hand through his hair, trying to come up with something quickly.

“So, um... the Ray of Frost hits the Fire Giant, distinguishing its flaming skin. It lets out a terrifying screech, causing the whole cave to shake, and rocks to start raining down on the party. So, next time we have to decide, do we risk it, stay and deliver the final blow to make sure the Giant dies, or do we flee and hope it gets buried under the collapsed cave,” he told, the dramatic story losing some of its effect as he told it in a hurried voice, starting to walk up the stairs, El following him.

“The cave is collapsing? Well we’re gonna ditch this place for sure! The Giant’s gonna get buried anyway,” Dustin commented, lifting his arms up in frustration.

“No, no, no!” Lucas exclaimed. “We can’t be sure of that! We’ve come this far, we have to finish this properly!”

“Me and Will can cast Protection from the rocks!” El chimed in from the top of the stairs, looking down at the others from over the railing.

“Well we just have to wait till next time to find out,” Mike said, getting out the door and stepping to the hallway.

“Ugh, fine! Bye El, see you tomorrow!” Lucas yelled out, the others

also joining in the goodbyes.

“Bye!” El yelled back before joining Mike in the hallway. They heard the debate start up again in the basement as they walked to the front door.

“Did you like the campaign?” Mike asked as they paused to put on their shoes.

“Yes,” El said, squatting down to tie the laces of her converse. “I liked the part with the wise dragon,” she added with a smile, getting up and straightening her back, her shoulder length curls falling to her face.

“Oh, cool. I got an idea for this one book I read a while ago. You can borrow it if you want?” he asked, opening the door to the warm August night.

“Bye, Jane!” Mrs Wheeler yelled from the kitchen and El returned her greeting before they walked out. Hopper’s police car was waiting on the driveway, its motor running, but other than that the late summer’s night was calm and quiet, the only other sounds being the sound of crickets and a neighbours dog barking somewhere in the distance.

“I can read that book. It sounds nice,” El answered as Mike shut the door behind him.

“Okay, well, um, I can give it to you tomorrow at school,” Mike answered, and he couldn’t help a smile from spreading on his face. Tomorrow would be the party’s first day at Hawkins High and even though he wasn’t looking forward to the summer vacation ending, he was beyond excited to have El join all of them at school. It was finally safe for her to be seen out in the world and to join school after Dr Owens had pulled some strings and arranged a place there for her.

“Okay, at school,” El said, her lips also spreading into a smile as she took a step closer and looked up at Mike, her face beaming.

“So, we’ll be at the police station at 7:30 tomorrow. Are you sure you are ready to ride your own bike? I can always give you a ride?” Mike

asked, reaching over his hand to hold hers, running his thumb across the back of her hand. El shook her head just slightly and said:

“No. I want to do it myself. I want to go to school for the first time on my own bike.” Mike nodded with a smile, bringing up his hand to gently tuck a strand of curly hair behind her ear.

“I have practiced so much. I want everyone to see,” El added after a moment, excitement and pride in her eyes as she inched even closer.

“I can’t wait,” Mike said, excitement and anticipation for tomorrow making him feel almost giddy. He glanced over El’s shoulder at the police car, and saw that Hopper was talking on his police radio, not paying attention to them. So he turned back to lock his eyes with El and after a second of warm and shivering anticipation he leaned his head down, catching her lips with his into a brief kiss goodbye. Breaking apart, El ran her fingers along his cheek and said:

“See you tomorrow, Mike.” She was so excited at the idea of seeing him almost every single day from now on, the idea making her feel like she was floating in air.

“Yeah, tomorrow,” Mike answered, a goofy grin on his face as they both took a step back. After squeezing their hands together one more time, El let go, walking backwards along the path leading away from the front door. Mike felt his heart clench as he looked at her, her face lit up by an excited smile and her curly hair flowing around her, illuminated from behind by the headlights of the car, making her look like some sort of glowing, ethereal being, too incredible and wonderful to be real. Three words bubbled up to his throat again, the ones he had been playing over and over in his head for the past months, trying to find the way to actually say them to her out loud. A few weeks ago he had been able to say the words aloud for the first time, whispering them in a barely audible voice into the darkness of his bedroom as he laid awake, not being able to fall asleep. Maybe this was the time to say them again, this time to her.

“El!” he said, loudly and frantically, his hands fidgeting.

“Yes?” she asked, stopping and standing still on the path, slight curiosity on her face. Mike gulped, shifting his weight from one foot

to another as he looked at her as she tucked a strand of her glowy hair behind her ear, the bright light catching the watch and blue bracelet she wore. The words got caught in Mike's throat and he glanced over at Hopper, looking at them with confusion on his face.

"Um, I... I'll see you tomorrow!" Mike finally got out, rising his hand in an awkward wave before shoving his hands into his pockets.

"Okay," El said, her brow knit in confusion and amusement as she waved back before turning around and running over to the car. While he watched the car drive away, Mike tried to reassure himself. It was okay, a perfect time to tell her would come. There were infinite more opportunities ahead, right?

- One Week Later -

The whole world was stretching and crumbling around him. Time had lost its meaning; it was either running along in a relentless pace, leaving him feeling lost and disoriented, or creeping along frustratingly slowly, leaving plenty of room and time for all the panic, fear and desperation to fill every inch of him, paralyzing him in place. Right now it was the former, blood was pounding in Mike's ears as everything was happening fast, and he felt like a meaningless speck caught in a stronger whirlwind, not able to do anything to affect what was happening. They were running, hurrying down a dark hallway, all of their steps loud and echoey as they pounded against the floor. People were speaking in breathy, serious and frantic noises - Hopper, Kali, Nancy, El - but the voices all muddled together in Mike's head. They rounded the corner and started filing down the metallic staircase that led out of the warehouse Kali called home and where they had all taken shelter in for the last day or so after escaping Hawkins and coming to Detroit to find Kali and number 006. Trying not to let his mind slip back into the details of the last few days and trying to focus back to the present, Mike squeezed El's hand as they ran down the rattling stairs, her touch the only thing anchoring him into reality. He looked down at her arm, she had rolled the sleeves of her worn flannel shirt up and had her bandana

wrapped around her wrist. The black paisley fabric was dirty with blood and Mike tried his best not to remember that not all of it was hers.

They got out of the stairwell, stopping to catch their breaths as they reached the abandoned loading dock area. Hopper kept on talking, walking over to Doc Owens's car, popping open the trunk and handing out a shotgun to Nancy. El let go of Mike's hand, walking over to Kali and 006, a short and fidgety young man, about five years older than Nancy. He was the reason they were all in Detroit in the first place, he had grown up at and escaped the local branch of the DoE lab and that was where Brenner was hiding, secretly continuing his experiments with making contact with the Upside Down.

Mike tried to even his breaths, running his hands roughly over his face, focusing back to the moment, the muffled voices around him becoming sentences and words.

"You hold down the fort here as long as possible. If Brenner's men find you again and you can't hold them back, just take this car and get the hell away, okay," Hopper explained to Nancy who nodded seriously, shoving boxes of extra bullets into her pockets.

"This is some bullshit! Do we just have to wait around again? Sitting around and hoping everything goes fine?" Lucas exclaimed, lifting his arms up in frustration.

"Yeah, I don't know if you forgot, but we helped you guys a shit ton last year!" Max agreed, crossing her arms across her chest defiantly. Hopper slammed down the car trunk loudly and turned to face them, his expression deadly serious.

"I sure as hell didn't forget. And that's exactly why I need you kids to stay here, to make sure Will stays safe until he gets his strength back. And to have his back when he's crossing over to the Upside Down. We are gonna need his help when we go out there," he explained, Kali and El nodding silently from where they were standing by the side of Kali's van. Max pursed her mouth shut, Lucas crossed his arms across his chest and Dustin just nodded seriously. Mike remained silent, rooted in his place, listening to his pulse pounding in his ears, feeling like he was a long distance away from everything that was happening. This couldn't be happening. Not again.

Mike plunged back into his frantic thoughts and didn't hear what Hopper said to him, blinking his eyes up as the older man towered over him.

"Huh?" Mike asked, his voice scratchy. Hopper sighed deeply, reaching his hand over to Mike, who looked down at it, his face filled with confusion. He was holding a handgun.

"What? I can't...I..." Mike stuttered, his voice frantic and his eyes wide.

"Even though your sister will be staying here with you, I need you kids to be able to defend yourselves. And I trust you to handle this. You have a good head on those lanky shoulders of yours, kid," Hopper said, carefully pressing the cold gun into Mike's hands, making sure to keep it pointed away from everyone. Mike gulped, looking away from the small gun that felt infinitely heavy in his hands and to Nancy, who stepped next to him, flinging the shotgun over her shoulder and reaching to hold the handgun, her voice calm and gentle as she explained how to set the safety on and off. Mike kept on nodding, his hands trembling as he set the gun inside the waistband of his jeans, feeling the metal burn against his skin. This was real.

The loading dock was a blur of steps and voices as last details of the plan were hammered out, and hugs of goodbye were exchanged. Mike closed his eyes as he felt his whole body trembling. He couldn't be like this. Hopper trusted him, Nancy trusted him, he had to protect Will. He clenched his hands into fists, trying to stop himself from shaking as he took a ragged breath. Suddenly he felt a soft hand touching his and he opened his eyes, seeing El standing in front of him.

"Mike. It will be okay," she whispered, her face filled with worry as he unclenched his fist, letting her weave her fingers together with his. Mike clenched his jaw, shaking his head. Here he was, scared shitless and barely able to even function and there she was, about to go in and infiltrate a heavily fortified military base and face the man who had tormented and abused her for countless of years and she was still trying to calm him down. Mike looked into El's eyes, his dark gaze so full of fear and desperation, that El had no other choice but to wrap her arms around him, burying her head into his chest,

muttering quiet words of reassurance to him as he breathed shakily, his face buried into her hair.

"I-I can come with you, I have a gun now, I can fight!" he muttered frantically in her ear, the fear of losing her overwhelming him. El shook her head, pulling away just slightly so that they could lean their foreheads together.

"No. You are safer here. And this is our fight. We need to face him and make him answer for his crimes. To stop these experiments for good," El explained, her voice resolute, her breath warm against his face.

"I just..." Mike started, letting out a ragged breath and clutching at the shirt fabric on her sides, clinging to her. "I feel so useless. I would do anything to keep you safe. Shit, I would die..."

"No," El said, her voice suddenly so strong and filled with force it almost scared him. Mike looked at her, her eyes serious and piercing. The past few days there had been a mask on her face. The same one she had worn the most of that week in November '83 and the one that had melted off her face when they had reunited at the Byers living room. Her eyes had been like steel, unreadable and indestructible, she couldn't afford to feel emotional, she was too busy surviving and carrying the world on her shoulders. Mike guessed it was a defense mechanism she had learned during those years locked in the lab, and he hated seeing her like that. But now the mask had melted away, her desperation bleeding through as she held his face in her hands.

"Don't you dare to even to talk about that," she said, her voice almost like a hiss as she looked up at him and he realized they were both as equally scared. The three words were on his tongue again and Mike opened his mouth, but El didn't let him speak, pulling his face to hers, kissing him with desperation. Mike held her closer, returning the kiss, trying to convey those three words to her through his lips. They pulled away, eyes frantic as they caught their breaths, still clinging onto each other.

"Jane, we must go. If Will is right, Brenner and his men are going to be ready to generate a new gate in the next hour," Kali yelled from

where she was standing beside the open van door, 006 had already gotten inside and Hopper was ready to climb onto the driver's seat. El sighed, bringing her hands down from Mike's face, resting them on his chest, feeling his frantic heartbeat under her fingers.

"You can do this," Mike assured her, trying to sound brave despite his voice trembling. "Just... Come back to me, okay" he added, his voice pleading and fragile, taking her hands in his again. El's eyes were serious and Mike could see she too was trying to keep her fear from showing as she nodded and reached up to give him one last quick peck before slowly walking away, holding onto his hand until she was absolutely out of reach.

Hopper turned on the engine of the van and Nancy, Lucas, Max, Dustin and Mike all shielded their eyes from the bright light of the headlights that beamed right at them. Pulling his hand away and peering his eyes at the light, Mike saw the outline of El as she crossed the beams of light, ready to get in the car. Suddenly he was brought back to the night last week when they had parted at his front yard. He could not believe only seven days had passed since that night. He could still remember the calm and warm summer air, the lazy sound of a sprinkler on some neighbors yard mixing in with the sounds of crickets as El smiled at him, her face surrounded by golden light. And suddenly all the air left his lungs as the gravity of the situation hit him. That night he had thought they would have countless more moments together, countless more chances for him to finally tell her how he felt. But now he could feel those chances fading away.

Clenching his fists, panic filling him, Mike took a frantic step forward, his voice loud and cracking as he yelled out:

"El!" She turned around, strands of hair that had fallen from her messy ponytail flowing around her as she did so, glowing in the bright light.

"Yes?" she asked, yelling over the loud noise of the car engine. Mike took a second to coach the words out of him, fixing his eyes on hers, not caring about the blinding light coming from behind her. It was what she was; a bright, blinding light, dangerous and strong, but too beautiful and captivating to look away.

"I love you," Mike yelled, and his voice didn't falter as he finally let the words out, his whole body somehow feeling both lighter and heavier as he did so.

"I love you so much," he added, and immediately wished he hadn't as he felt his voice breaking and tears starting to prickle his eyes. El looked back at him from across the platform, her lips slightly parted and her eyes wide and heavy with emotion. For a second a crushing fear fell over Mike. Maybe this wasn't the right time. Maybe she wasn't ready. Maybe...

"I love you too, Mike," she said, and even though she was forced to yell out the words, they were still filled with such softness, warmth and vulnerability that they felt like intimate words whispered only to him. They both stood still, their gazes locked to each other, the weight of the words hanging between them but warming every single inch of them like the bright light filling the space around them. None of the people around them dared to say anything to break the moment, their gazes shifting around the loading dock. After a while El blinked, forcing herself to focus back on the mission on hand, looking over at the car. With a shuddering sigh she let the mask fall back over her face, her steps defiant as she climbed into the van. As the car pulled away, Mike felt his knees buckle and he would have fallen down if it weren't for Dustin who swooped in, holding him up.

"I got you, man. I got you," Dustin assured him, wrapping his arm under Mike's armpits, keeping him steady. "Everything's gonna be fine," he continued, his voice calm and full of empathy and Mike let out a ragged breath, trying his best to believe him.